

The University of Chicago

TYPES OF RELIGIOUS
EXPERIENCE REFLECTED IN THE
CHRISTIAN LITURGY OF
THE FIRST CENTURY

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1934

By
EUGENE SIMPSON TANNER

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CHAPTER XVII

SUMMARY

The modern approach to liturgy lays stress on several points. (1) The approach must be from the point of view of behavior. Myth and literature are secondary developments having as their purpose the explanation of rites already in use. (2) Liturgical action arises in direct response to the physical, social and psychological needs of an individual or group. Consequently, (3) environment is very powerful in moulding a liturgy. (4) The paradoxical fact that a liturgy is often perpetuated by force of tradition after having lost its original meaning is also recognized.

The fact that the modern approach has been so fruitful in the study of the liturgies of the various religions might easily lead one to assume that it would have been used in the study of Christian liturgy. A survey of the vast researches of Roman Catholic and Anglican scholars together with the less extensive work of Protestant scholars shows that the Christian liturgy has not been approached from the point of view of behavior, function, and environment. The approach all too often has been based on theological presuppositions of various types.

The Roman Catholic scholars are to be thanked for their diligence in making the sources for liturgical study available, and for excellent studies setting forth some of the phases of Christianity's environment. Radical Protestant scholars are to be thanked for pointing the way to an unprejudiced study of the Christian liturgy. Such a study must follow the modern approach outlined above, must be free from theological presupposition, and

must have a critical view of developing Christianity.

The liturgy of primitive Christianity developed in response to the physical, social, and psychological needs which members of the expanding cult of Jesus found in their environment. It should always be remembered, however, that the Christian movement did not begin de novo. It received traditional liturgical practice both from its Jewish and pagan background. This traditional heritage had either to be discarded or transformed in accordance with the needs of the expanding movement. The recognition of the above facts leads one to make a study of the liturgical environment of primitive Christianity.

The liturgy of early Hebrew religion had grown up in response to the needs of a nomadic people. The invasion of Palestine by the Hebrews made necessary an extensive transformation of their liturgy in line with the new needs of the agricultural environment. A third great transformation of the Hebrew liturgy took place as a result of the centralization of worship in Jerusalem and the exile. The old agricultural rites were cut off from the experiences and needs that had produced them and were transformed in accordance with the new nationalistic outlook of the larger social group. The sacrificial cultus of Hebrew religion carried this liturgical heritage of the Jews down to the disaster of 66-70 A.D.

The temple liturgy of the first century did meet certain patriotic and national needs of the Jewish people. That there were a large class of needs that it did not meet is shown by the fact that by the first century B.C. another institution, the synagogue, had come to be of great importance and was ultimately to supplant the temple.

The synagogue was a very unique institution in the ancient world. A study of the synagogue building, its furnishings, its

officers, and its liturgy all reveal an institution whose primary function was teaching. The liturgy of the synagogue arose in response to needs radically different from those met by the liturgies of the pagan cults of the first century. (1) The synagogue liturgy was non-mystical. (2) It reflected a non-dualistic conception of man. (3) Ecstasy and enthusiasm had no place in it. (4) The worship experience was not individualistic. (5) Sacramentalism was entirely foreign to Jewish experience.

The liturgy of early Roman religion had arisen in response to the needs of the familia in an agricultural environment. This liturgy functioned excellently as long as there were these limited social groups faced by the needs of an agricultural environment. During the course of Roman history serious inroads were made upon this type of social life. To the extent that these inroads were successful the religion of the familia was seriously modified or disappeared. Nevertheless, all through Roman history enough of the old type of social organization prevailed to keep the religion of the familia a living thing.

If the religion of the familia persisted for the most part unchanged through the centuries the same cannot be said for the religion of the State. The life of the early city-state had its economic basis in agriculture. As a consequence the ritual of the familia was taken over the benefit of the State. But Roman agricultural ritual, like Hebrew agricultural ritual, when cut off from the land gradually lost its significance. The Hebrews had been able to reinterpret, adjust, and transform their rites in response to the ever changing needs of their environment. The Romans followed a quite different procedure in meeting the needs of a changing environment. They did try to meet new situations by maintaining a pax with the di indigetes but when this proved to be of

no avail new powers, the di novensiles, were brought in from the outside who were able to cope with the new problems. The need for a religion of patriotism was met by the taking over of the Etruscan Jupiter Optimus Maximus. The need for divine protection in the realms of trade, commerce, travel, and industry led the Roman people during the course of the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C. to worship Hercules, Castor and Pollux, Minerva, Demeter, Dionysus, Persephone, Apollo, Hermes, and Poseidon. Asclepius by direction of the Sibylline books was brought to Rome in 293 B.C. in order to rid the city of a severe plague. Competent scholars are in agreement that the various supplicationes and lectisternia celebrated from the winter of 218-17 on, in response to the danger involved in the war of Hannibal, mark an epoch in the development of Roman religion. The Greek and Roman deities were henceforth worshipped with a Greek ritual. At another crisis in the war the need for a new source of divine aid was met by the introduction of the Magna Mater of Pessinus. The cults thus far discussed were introduced by the Roman State for its own benefit. During the Second Century B.C. and following the growing individualism and cosmopolitanism of the populace together with adverse social conditions led to the penetration of the masses by a number of mystery cults of salvation. The particular contribution of the imperial period to Roman religion was emperor worship. The ritual in this case was in response to one of the most fundamental desires of man, social security.

The Greeks, like the Hebrews and Romans, had early developed a ritual in response to the needs of an agricultural environment. These ritual practices produced a supernatural world peopled by ancestors; heroes; spirits of agriculture; and spirits of the sea, the rivers, and the wind. The invaders from the north who

overwhelmed the older Minoan-Mycenaean civilization brought with them the Olympian gods. The ritual directed to the Olympian gods can be summarized in the phrase do ut des. Olympian ritual was for the purpose of establishing a friendly social relationship with the gods. The experience in chthonic ritual is expressed by the phrase do ut abeas. Chthonic ritual was apotropaic. Its purpose was to appease the powers of the underworld.

The chronology of chthonic ritual is very simple. The needs of social groups in prehistoric Greece had called forth this type of ritual. The fact that these needs have persisted throughout Greek history explains the persistence of chthonic religion. On the other hand Olympian ritual was connected very definitely with Hellenic Culture. With the passing of this culture Olympian ritual lost its connection with the vital religious experience of the people. The conquest of Alexander brought vast economic, social, cultural, political, and religious changes and inaugurated the Hellenistic age. The people of the Mediterranean world in the Hellenistic age resorted to a variety of religions for help in meeting their physical, social, and psychological needs. (1) There were survivals of many of the pre-Hellenistic tribal and national cults that functioned more or less successfully in the new situation. (2) The worship of the ruler functioned with relation to one set of definite needs. (3) There was an ever increasing number of people who chose to live by philosophy rather than religion. (4) The religions most characteristic of the Hellenistic age were the mysteries. They were the most successful in meeting the particular needs of the masses of the people.

Two very different points of view are to be distinguished in the attitude of philosophers toward the liturgy. Heraclitus, Diogenes, Epicurus, Zeno, Theophrastus, and Epictetus criticized

sacramentalism on rational grounds. They maintained that knowledge of the gods and the world was obtained through the functioning of the intellectual processes. A very different point of view was represented by Plato, Posidonius, Philo, Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblicus, and the Hermeticists. They in varying degrees represented philosophical mysticism. They maintained that God could not be comprehended by Reason. However, they rejected sacramental ritual as a means for attaining knowledge of God. Such knowledge was attained by means of a type of ecstasy independent of ritual.

Rational and mystical philosophy could not meet the needs of the masses of people in the Graeco-Roman world who were confronted by a complexity of needs which the rituals of the traditional religions were incapable of meeting. The characteristic needs of the hellenistic period were met most successfully by the mystery religions. Thrace contributed the cult of Dionysus. Greece contributed the cult at Eleusis and Orphism. Persia contributed Mithraism. Asia Minor and Syria produced a number of these cults. Egypt contributed the cult of Isis. The diverse origin of these cults explains the fact that they differ considerably from one another. Nevertheless, these cults were remarkably responsive to the needs of the Hellenistic world and display a number of common features. A survey of the liturgy of these cults reveals an endless variety of ritual acts. All the cults agree, however, in having a ritual which functioned sacramentally. The ritual produced certain effects in and of itself. The sacramental effect of the ritual of these cults was the transformation of the very being of the individual participant in the ritual. The individual came into realistic union with the Lord of the cult.

The powerful sacramentalism of the mysteries made them religions of salvation par excellence. The harassed individual of

the Hellenistic age by union with the Lord of the cult received salvation in the present world. He was freed from the domination of his evil physical body. He was given protection from the astral forces on the one hand and pernicious demons on the other. His bodily ailments were healed. Most important of all union with the Lord of the cult was an absolute guarantee of salvation in the world to come. The mysteries offered a number of other satisfactions to the individual. The emotionalism of these cults met a particular need of many depressed individuals. Several of these cults offered intellectual satisfaction of a high order. Their elaborate ritualism offered satisfaction in the aesthetic realm. Though these cults were individualistic and universalistic they did offer the individual by his participation in the rites of a brotherhood social satisfaction that was sorely needed as a result of the cosmopolitanism of the Graeco-Roman world.

Christianity emerged in the Hellenistic age. To what extent was its liturgy taken over from Judaism and to what extent was it developed in direct response to the needs of the Graeco-Roman world? A clear perspective is gained by an examination of three characteristic types of liturgies that go back to the fourth century. The liturgy of Serapion reflects the function of the Christian liturgy in Egypt. This liturgy contains much philosophical terminology, maintains that God can be perceived only through mystical experience, and reflects a highly refined type of ecstasy. The rites were thought to function sacramentally. The type of experience in the liturgy of Serapion has its closest analogy in Hermeticism. Its sacramentalism, however, is much more closely related to that of the various mystery religions. It is evident that the Christian liturgy as reflected in Serapion had gone very far from Judaism in adapting itself to the syncretistic philosophical thought-world of Egypt. But in this case

Christianity had itself made a further highly effective syncretism. It had successfully combined popular sacramentalism with respectable philosophical mysticism.

An examination of the liturgies of the Greek church show that it is evident that the Christian liturgy in the east had been adapted to the characteristic needs of its environment. The well-known trend of the Latin Church to regard the Mass as a sacrifice stands in contrast to the Greek conception of the mystery drama. The liturgy was fully sacramental in its effects. Thus Christian liturgy in the west also functioned in relation to the needs of its environment.

In three great regions of the expansion of Christianity we note the diversity of its cult life. This diversity is most naturally explained as resulting from its response to the intellectual and social needs of these regions. In spite of this diversity there is a broad unity. Christianity offered the individual a ritual which was very powerful. Sacramentally it worked for the worshipper salvation both in this world and in the world to come.

All scholars recognize that the individualistic-mystic type of liturgy of the Christianity of the Fourth Century stands in complete contrast to the social-ethical liturgy of first century Judaism. In what stage of its development did Christianity break with Judaism on this point and what were the forces that brought about the transformation? There are two well defined points of view on this subject. (1) Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic scholars maintain that Jesus himself made Christianity a sacramental redemption religion. (2) The liberal protestant view is that Christianity became a sacramental redemption religion in response to environmental forces. However, it is held that this transformation did not take place until after the period in

which the New Testament books were composed. The obvious theological presuppositions of the first view and the obvious apologetic interest in the second view leads one to examine the Christian writings of the First Century.

The letters of Paul are the starting point for a historical approach to primitive Christianity. These documents in the past have been used primarily for the purpose of learning Paul's theological ideas. We are now coming to see that they are the sources for a study of historical developments of much greater importance. The letters of Paul give a priceless reflection of an important area of developing Christianity in the sixth decade of the First Century. It is unfortunate that only one of Paul's letters deals in detail with problems of worship. This letter, I Corinthians, is our main source although there is much valuable information in incidental remarks in the other letters.

An examination of Paul's letters shows that the Christian believer was a person who had passed through a revolutionary and transforming experience. He had incorporated the Spirit and had come into a relation of realistic union with the Lord of the Christian cult. What part did rites have in the attainment of this experience?

First of all the fact must be faced that the central experience of Christianity could be attained without rites of any kind. This is true both for Paul and the Christians reflected in his letter. The reception of the gospel message with faith brought spirit endowment.¹ Another means by which Christians in the Pauline circle experienced contact with the Spirit was through ecstasy and enthusiasm induced without the aid of a sacramental ritual.²

¹Gal. 3:1-5.

²Gal. 1:11-12, 15-17; I Cor. 2:10; II Cor. 12:1-6; I Cor. 14:6; 29-30.

Are the ecstatic and enthusiastic experiences of Paul and the Christians reflected by him to be related to the Jewish or Pagan background? It is impossible to relate these experiences to the Jewish background. On the other hand this type of experience in most of the Mysteries was sacramentally conditioned. However, ecstatic experiences independent of ritual are found in the most intellectual strata of the Mysteries and among the philosophical exponents of mysticism. Were Paul and the Christians of his day influenced by philosophical thought? An examination of the works of the philosophers will show that their ideas on this subject were highly speculative. Ecstasy indeed was attainable but it was for the few and seldom experienced. It is very tempting to establish a direct intellectual contact between Posidonius and Paul. It will be recalled that Posidonius was a Syrian whose period of intellectual activity fell within the first half of the First Century B.C. and further than one of his followers, Athenodorus, lived in Tarsus until his death in 7 A.D. Certainly contact with this type of thought was available for Paul. The fact that Paul did not avail himself of this opportunity is shown by the non-speculative nature of his thought and the frequency with which he and those of his circle had ecstatic experiences. The strong probability on the basis of the evidence is that we see in the Christianity of Paul's day a reflection of oriental mysticism on a proletarian plane. The same mysticism was absorbed and reflected by Posidonius and Philo on a philosophical plane. The same mysticism penetrated the various mysteries on planes corresponding to their cultural development.

The above evidence shows that in Pauline Christianity there was access to the Spirit by means other than sacramental. Driven by apologetic interests many scholars have placed undue emphasis

on these facts and have endeavored to maintain that the Pauline conception of the Christian rites was non-sacramental. We have no right to read consistency into the thought of Paul and the primitive Christians were such is not found. An examination of Paul's references to Baptism¹ and the Lord's Supper² clearly shows that Paul and the Christians reflected by him looked upon these rites as sacramental. Both rites functioned to bring the believer into union with the Lord of the Christian cult. This experience in connection with the Christian rites was not Jewish. It is a clear indication that the Christian rites at a time so early as that of Paul had come to function in relation to the particular demands of the pagan environment.

Paul gives considerable information on the spoken elements in the worship service at Corinth.³ The central elements in the Corinthian service were ecstatic speaking, ecstatic prayer, ecstatic song, and ecstatic thanksgiving of a very individualistic type. One needs only a slight knowledge of the synagogue service to recognize that such behavior was thoroughly un-Jewish. On the other hand such spiritistic phenomena were frequent and normal in pagan environment. One must conclude that in this case the Corinthians had carried over their pagan practices into the Christian worship service. Paul had been influenced by the pagan elements in his environment to the extent that he could fully appreciate the value of the various forms of ecstatic expression. However, Paul had carried over a basic Jewish conception. He maintained that worship must function for the benefit of the group.

Paul was out of harmony with the Corinthians on another

¹Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:3-7; Col. 2:11-13a; I Cor. 12:13; I Cor. 6:11; I Cor. 15:29.

²I Cor. 10:1-5, 14-22; 11:17-34.

³I Cor. Chs. 11-14.

matter relative to public worship. They were disorderly.¹ Paul's discussion does reveal a meeting which was informal, spontaneous and even disorderly. The service does not seem to have had any official leaders. The various members made their individual contributions -- a song, a teaching, a revelation, an ecstatic utterance, or an explanation of one -- under the guidance of the Spirit. It is very important to note that Paul was not opposed to the Corinthian service. There is no hint that he desired to impose on them a worship service that even approached the orderliness of the synagogue service. It was only the extreme disorder of the Corinthian meeting against which he was protesting. Furthermore, there is no hint that Paul disapproved of the contents of the Corinthian worship service. He was simply protesting against the emphasizing of certain forms of expression to the exclusion of others. This is of very great significance because Paul's own view together with his statement, "This is the rule in all Christian churches" leads to the inference that similar informal and spontaneous worship services were common in the other Christian communities with which Paul came in contact.

This examination of the worship service of the Pauline churches from the point of view of religious experience has shown conclusively that the liturgy of primitive Christianity was developed largely in response to the needs and practices present in the pagan world. This examination has also shown the unsoundness of the almost universal assumption that the Christian liturgy was a direct continuation of the Jewish. In fact we have seen that most of the elements in the worship service reflected by Paul root directly in the Pagan environment. In the case of baptism and

¹Cor. 14:26-33.

the eucharistic rite which may have been taken over from Judaism, we find a thoroughgoing transformation of function which brought these rites into relation with the needs and experiences of the pagan world.

A critical study of the synoptic gospels yields considerable information on the state of the Christian liturgy during the last decades of the First Century. The traditional position has always maintained that the gospels are sources for the life of Jesus and has proceeded to use them in a quite uncritical way as such. Critical study has clearly shown that the synoptic gospels are primary sources for the life and experience of the developing Christian community and only secondarily sources for the life of Jesus. It is recognized that many of the stories in the gospels with reference to the worship experience of Jesus are aetiological. The communities justified their liturgical practices by reading them back into the experience of Jesus.

Hints in the gospel tradition together with inferences on the basis of environment indicate that Jesus participated normally in synagogue and temple worship. The highly tendentious gospel accounts of Jesus' contacts with these institutions are to be explained on the basis of the later Christian attitude toward Judaism, and its evaluation of Jesus. One must distinguish clearly between Jesus, the worshipper, and Jesus, the object of worship.

We have already noted that the rites of baptism and the Lord's Supper were important in the worship of Christians at the time Paul wrote his letters. What do the gospels show us on the origin and later development of these rites? The gospel accounts of the activity of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus are highly tendentious. The reports in the synoptic gospels of the eschatological message John preached and the baptism he practiced

are more probably historical. We come to this conclusion because the eschatological message of John as well as his baptism are normal in a Jewish environment. It is also most probable that Jesus was baptized by John. Over against these elements in the gospels there are others which are highly legendary. Christians in the gospel writing age wielded their polemic against the disciples of John and confirmed their own opinions concerning the superiority of Jesus by reading back into John attitudes which were the product of the later Christian community itself. Thus when Mark has John prophesy that Jesus' baptism will be "in the holy Spirit" (Matthew and Luke add "and in fire") he is expressing the community's consciousness that Christian baptism with its spiritism was very different from John's baptism which was without spiritistic phenomena. The interests of the community also dominate the gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism. Mark, followed by Matthew and Luke, represent Jesus receiving God's approval at baptism and Matthew further expresses the later Christian point of view when he maintains that Jesus was really not in need of John's baptism. The aetiological nature of the account is clearly seen in the attribution to Jesus of the later Christians' experience of Spirit endowment at baptism. The other references to baptism in the synoptic gospels represent the highly developed point of view of the community.¹

A careful examination of the gospel accounts of the Christian cult meals shows that they not only presuppose the death of Jesus, but also present a highly theological interpretation of his death. The student inevitably concludes that these stories are sources for the practice of the community. Viewed thus they

¹Cf. Mark 10:38, 39; Luke 12:50; Mark 16:15-16; Mt. 28:12-20.

reflect the thoroughgoing sacramentalism of the rites of the expanding Christian movement. Inference on the basis of environment leads us to suppose that Jesus participated in the various non-sacramental meals of Judaism.

Scholars now recognize the unity of Luke-Acts. In the study of Luke we were faced with the problem of distinguishing between the practices of the historical Jesus and the practices ascribed to Jesus by the community. In Acts there is a very similar problem. Is there any method by which we can get back of what the author of Luke Acts, on the basis of later Christian experience, felt must have been the activities and practices of the Jerusalem community and Paul to the historical facts? One again uses the criterion of environment and has in addition the valuable testimony of Paul's letters.

The application of these tests to Acts' account of the experience of Jesus' followers at Pentecost leads to the probable conclusion that they did experience an eschatological endowment of the Spirit. Such an experience is Jewish, not Hellenistic. On the other hand the many formal elements in the account are of no historical value for the experience of the Jerusalem community.

What were the relations of the Jerusalem followers of Jesus to synagogue and temple? The criterion of Jewish environment leads one to the conclusion that these contacts were more vital and less formal than Acts represents. On the other hand the examination of Paul's letters throws serious doubts on Acts representation of Paul's frequent contact with synagogue and temple. On the basis of a critical examination Acts is another witness for the fact already so evident in Paul; that is, gentile Christianity developed independent of the synagogue.

Our purpose has been accomplished in showing the very early

transformation of the Christian liturgy by its adjustment to the needs of the people of the Graeco-Roman world. We will conclude by indicating certain trends evident in the liturgy at the beginning of the Second Century. (1) The Christian liturgy in this period was adjusting itself to various environments. (2) There was an ever growing sacramentalism. (3) There was a growing formalism with reference to the persons who were to lead and participate in Christian worship. (4) Parallel with this development was the growing formalization of the contents of the liturgy. (5) Another parallel development was the growing elaboration of the liturgy.

Jesus and his immediate followers met their worship needs by adherence to the institutions of Judaism. The followers of the heavenly Jesus on gentile soil broke with Judaism and developed a new type of liturgy which functioned with relation to the needs of the various social groups of the Graeco-Roman world which Christianity penetrated. This thoroughgoing adjustment to environment progressed most rapidly in the first decades of gentile Christianity's history. This rapid adjustment was possible because of the fluid and spontaneous nature of the new movement. Before the end of the First Century the movement gained self-consciousness and began the institutionalization and standardization of its attainments which had been worked out in the field of vital religious experience. This process reached its culmination in the formation of the Old Catholic Church toward the close of the Second Century. It is very significant that the liturgy had already been thoroughly transformed by the needs of the gentile environment before the process of standardization set in. It was this transformed liturgy that was formalized and elaborated and which ultimately developed in the various regions into the great liturgies which emerge in the Fourth and subsequent centuries.

